

OCTOBER 15, 1981

Rain and drizzle have been in the weather picture for the past week. Close to an inch and a half fell at our headquarters. Up at the other place, the gauges would have run over if the bugs in the tubes hadn't been so light that they floated over the tops.

Scattered parts of the Shortgrass Country were plenty dry. Finding the exact areas were difficult to pinpoint. Market conditions have been so erratic all summer that relying on a herders' report was about like trying to gain some useful information from a floor trader on Wall Street, or a pit man on the Commodity Exchange in Chicago.

The sheep men were the last to join the wreck. No one was particularly concerned about the dull lamb market in July. Lambs are always draggy at the peak of summer. But when the August rains failed to spark more than a week or so rally, black flags were proclaiming that woolies were joining the hollow horn trade.

By the last week of September, lambs were being shipped into San Angelo from as far away as Colorado. I sure appreciate the thought of the new competition. 4-H Club kids wanting to feed a pen of three were the biggest volume buyers in Texas. The only way we could retaliate was to send Coloradoans more elk hunters to cover up their countryside, and that didn't sound like much of a threat because most of the hombres I knew were too broke to go on a hunting trip.

Saddest part of the story to me was to have to admit that Colorado and New Mexico were in as big a jam as we were. On the sly, we'd been working on a deal to copy the Australians' idea on ground meat. Part of the idea was going to be to make contact with some out of state chicken farmers in hopes that lambs could be used in chicken salad like the Aussies were blending kangaroo and horse meat.

With more lambs coming, the ration was going to have to be raised so high that it was going to take too much mayonnaise to make a profit. As light as a lot of the stomach worm sheep had been, we'd been counting on one fryer equaling one knothead lamb. It made it impossible to even think of adding in those big old mountain lambs to the deal.

Too, I didn't like the thought of all those Colorado truckers making an empty back haul. Judging from the dissatisfied looks on the wives' faces as they sat in the pickups around the auction rings, if some of the boys did jump the state lines, I couldn't see any hope of those gals filing a missing person bulletin to recover their husbands.

I watched one trucker checking his tires out at the yard. He wasn't fooling anyone. I could tell that he was checking underneath for hobos.

The summer is bound to have caused a lot of market experts to seek early retirement. In particular, the handicappers that chose to follow their own instinct by buying sheep or cattle.

I'm sure you've seen things a lot rougher than they've been this year. But I'll be willing to bet that not any of us have ever gone through such unpredictable times.